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AUTHOR Doxey, Isabel
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ABSTRACT

Field education or the practicum experience is at the core of most early childhood education preservice programs because it is viewed as the most significant contributor to the development of professional expertise. The Early Childhood Education Program at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, Canada, requires 600 hours of field education over 4 years. This study defined the relationships between students and field education associates and between students and institute faculty members, examined the relationships' priority to students, and discussed the implications of the field experience for students' professional development. Students selected randomly from all 4 years of the program were surveyed to identify characteristics of positive relationships with field education associates and faculty advisers and how these characteristics were prioritized in comparison to subject knowledge and expertise, the ability to model exemplary practices, and the ability to provide resources and program planning assistance. Results indicated that personal qualities such as patience and flexibility and relationship characteristics such as accessibility and supportiveness both individually and together were viewed as more important than professional expertise for both field education associates and faculty advisers. (Contains 32 references.) (KDFB)

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Preparing Early Childhood Educators: Relationship Theory and Field Experiences

Isabel Doxey PH.D
School of Early Childhood Education,
Ryerson Polytechnic University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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Introduction

There is a pervasive belief among childcare personnel,teachers,trainers and researchers that experience is the most significant contributor to the development of professional expertise. Recent reforms in teacher education, that have increased the amount of field experience endorse the argument that such experience is essential for linking theory and practice (York University, 1993). Early childhood educators endorse this belief even more strongly than most because of their commitment to the philosophy that children learn best from experience (Morine-Dershimer, 1991, McLeans, August, 1966) and their belief that preparation for practice is a fundamental aspect of a new, advanced professionalism. (Vanderven, 1986). Field education, practicum or placement is the core of

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most early childhood preservice programs.

The triad relationship context of student, field education associate and institute Faculty member is also characteristic of most field education requirements. The study reported here attempted to

- define this relationship context
- gauge its priority to students through a survey
- examine the implications for a student's professional development.

BACKGROUND

The four year degree program of the School of Early Childhood Education at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto requires field education assignments during each of the four years for a total of approximately 600 hours culminating with a self-directed 'internship' practicum.

Throughout the years, the delivery of this component has presented many challenges, including defining the roles and responsibilities of field education associates and the institution's Faculty advisors. Trying to problem-solve around this challenge in particular led to a review of some current literature relative to a graduate thesis by the Placement

Coordinator. This review generated the following questions:

* What are the primary outcomes expected from the field education experience?

* How can these outcomes best be nurtured by the field education associate and the Faculty Advisor?

* What implications might there be for evaluating the field education experience, orienting the field site associates, assessing or assigning Faculty Advisors or supervisors?

An outcome of teacher preparation should be teachers who know how to learn. One report by Hogben and Simpson (1986) calls for graduates who are good at deciding what ought to be done rather than good at continuing what schools now do. Much current literature has documented the positive learning that results from reflecting on practice (Marshall, 1996). One of the barriers to this reflection is the lack of opportunity for student teachers to address personal concerns about their teaching (Duquette 1991). Calderhead's (1988, 1991) work also has documented the impact of students' own knowledge and beliefs. Clandinin (1986) cites this new attention to teacher thinking rather than actions as a significant change in teacher education.

From this outcome perspective, two key values of the field experience are the opportunities to

* establish goals for self-improvement,
* define one's own teaching style (Zeichner, 1993).

The literature review suggested that these opportunities will only exist if the following assumptions about adult learners are also considered:

* that an adult learner is a self-directed organism whose experience is a resource for learning and who benefits from being mutually involved in defining his/her learning needs and the best methods to meet these.
* that a supportive climate exists for self-directed learning

Another key question was identified: what is the relationship context that best facilitates these field education outcomes for early childhood education students? It was decided to use this question as the basis for a small research investigation.

Through their relationships with field associates, and faculty personnel, students receive feedback about the consequences of their actions and decisions. These relationships invite a socially constructed knowledge transformation process (Clandinnin, 1986). A climate of positive

relationships

* nurtures openness in reflection
* supports the risk taking that leads to change and improvement.
* reduces a student's anxiety
* improves confidence and competence

Positive relationships are particularly important for beginning students. As novices, their knowledge is scant, unorganized and unrelated (Calderhead and Robson, 1991). Their anxiety about their abilities may be high (Goffin & Day, 1994, Katz,1989). Positive relationships are characterized by mutual respect, trust and a clarity of respective roles through which the student receives performance feedback. Corporaal (1991) has identified the influence of this psychosocial aspect for building 'webs of wisdom (p325). This is the desired climate for achieving field education outcomes.

Doxey (1987) cited three models for these field education relationships:

1. the apprenticeship model - typified by a superior/subordinate where the focus is primarily didactic or instructional.
2. the growth model - where the supervisory emphasis is on the

character structure of the novice student teacher with the intention of individual growth and psychological development.

3. the role systems model - built around communication patterns, role expectations and mechanisms of control that provide a negotiating framework (Rowe and Shields,1985)

A well-known paradigm for examining relationships comes from Carl Rogers. He identified three conditions:

1. empathy: the perception a fundamental appreciation of one's situation

2. congruence: defined as genuineness and absence of facade

3. unconditional positive regard : when students are valued as individuals exclusive of their performances or level of competency.

The work by Fedele, Miller and associates at the Stone Centre of Wellesley College on relationship theory blends and extends these models. The Stone Centre's work has focused on the development of self in women It offers a most useful application to early childhood field education because nearly 97% of the childcare personnel are women (Caring for a Living, 1992). A developmental goal noted by Miller (1991) is to be comfortable and happy

with one's self and one's role in life. The 'self-in-relation' theory is predicated on the belief that "the self is organized and developed in the context of other relationships'" (Surrey, 1991, p52)

The hypothesis for this study was that the quality of supportive relationships is a key factor for successful field education, particularly for early childhood education students.

STUDY METHODS

The relationship context which was investigated included

a) student and Faculty member

b) student and field associate or cooperating educator.

Two questions framed the study methodology

1. To what extent do student' identify any of the characteristics of positive relationships in relation to their field education associates and Faculty advisors?

2. How were these characteristics prioritized in comparison with other qualities more traditionally linked with professional competence as subject knowledge and expertise, the ability to model exemplary practices and to provide resources and program planning assistance?

A random selection of students across all four years of the B.A.A. program of the School of Early Childhood Education at Ryerson Polytechnic University were surveyed. They were asked to list ALL those qualities they would want in an exemplary field education (placement) associate and Faculty Advisor. The second task required them to rank their lists from first (highest) to fifth (lowest) to indicate the order of their preferences for these qualities.

All descriptors of 142 completed surveys were tallied. There were 579 rankings of these descriptors for field education (placement) associates and 541 for Faculty Advisors.

The responses were classified into three categories.

1. PERSONAL QUALITIES

references to personality characteristics or qualities of a personal style which would exist regardless of the existence or context of a relationship. The most commonly listed adjectives were understanding, helpful, friendly, patient, flexible.

2. RELATIONSHIPS

included words which described some dimension of a relationship or interactive style between two or more people. The most commonly listed

adjectives were accesible, communicative, supportive, approachable.

3. PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE

either skill or knowledge related to working with children and their parents in childcare or school field education sites. The most frequently used adjectives in this category were informative, knowledgeable, organized, resourceful, professional.

RESULTS

The chart on the following page presents the survey results by categories, using real numbers and percentage calculations. As this was a small in-house study, no statistical tests were done on the raw data or percentages.

The survey results revealed that students rated

1. the personal qualities of both field education associates and Faculty advisors as more important than their professional expertise.

2. the relationship dimension as more important than the professional expertise of either the field associate or the Faculty Advisor.

3. the combination of personal and relationship as significantly more important than the professional expertise of either the field associate or the Faculty advisor.

	Field Educator /579		Faculty Advisor /541	
PERSONAL	291	50.26%	240	44.36%
RELATIONSHIP	193	33.33%	179	33.09%
TOTALS Personal + Relationship	484	83.59%	419	74.15%
PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE	95	16.38%	122	22.55%
TOTALS	579	99.97%	541	99.95%

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DISCUSSION

One implication suggested by the questions and data of this study is the need to provide for positive relationships within the field education triad of student, field education associate and institute Faculty member.

The effects of these positive relationships can depend on many factors, including

a) the stage of the student's development as a professional and previous experiences. It may be hypothesized that most beginning students need more personal support from both their field education associates and Faculty Advisors than do older or more experienced students. In the latter stages of one's professional education, the professional expertise of the student's mentors, peers or supervisors may become more significant and influential.

b) willingness of Faculty members, field associates and students to acknowledge the signifiicance of the relationship dimension and to be open to creating positive, supportive relationships .

c) section sizes for field education may mitigate against Faculty advisors getting to know their students as individuals and developing a rapport with each that defines the context for positive relationships.

d) the length, location of the field education assignment may not provide an appropriate opportunity for relationship building.

e) support conditions as noted by Fedele (1991) to

i. establish connections

ii. create empathy through identification with another person to form a cognitive assimilation of the experience as a basis for response.

iii. feel heard, accepted and respected.

The supportive relationship proposed by Miller (1991) and characterized here is more mutual than a mentor relationship (Levenson, 1978). Four factors can heighten the potential for this mutuality.

1. the timing of the placement in relation to the student's developmental needs

2.the student's own style of learning and relating

3. the match between the student, field associate and Faculty Advisor.

4. the training and preparation of the field associate and advisor.

The relationship dimension may be critical not only to achieving the desired outcomes or objectives of the pre-service program, but also to the perceived success of a field education assignment. In some instances, it

may be useful to reassign either a student to another Faculty advisor or field education site to enhance the potential for mutual relationships. Often such decisions are made on the basis of the professional competence and expertise of the field associate rather than the relationship potential.

It could be that having different field experiences in different environments with different field education associates may contribute more to a student's confidence and competence than one long assignment in a site where a relationship may not be mutally positive nor supportive.

This study supports the position that field education is more than a skill training exercise. If field experiences provide a context of positive relationships they offer maximum opportunities for the early childhood education student to grow in confidence as well as competence.

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